

Johns Hopkins Community Physicians

A Million Hearts® Success Story

Million Hearts® is a national initiative to prevent one million heart attacks and strokes by 2017.



JHCP At a Glance:

For Fiscal Year 2012

Primary Care Practices: 36

Primary Care Physicians: 200

Total Annual Patient Visits: 750,000

Blood Pressure Control Rate: 66%

Improving Skills of Medical Assistants Boosts Efficacy of Blood Pressure Control

As the largest health specialty group practice in Maryland, Johns Hopkins Community Physicians (JHCP) cares for over 230,000 patients by means of 200 primary care physicians and another 200 specialists and hospitalists.

Medical assistants provide valuable clinical and administrative support in the primary care setting, performing a variety of tasks including patient intake and screening, administration of medications and immunizations, and measurement of vital signs including blood pressure. Quality control that assures the competency level of medical assistants is key for both efficiency of the practice and for positive patient outcomes. In the management of hypertensive patients, consistent and correct measurement of blood pressure is essential.

“While taking a patient’s blood pressure may seem like a simple task, mistakes do happen—including number bias,” explains Maura McGuire, MD, an Assistant Professor of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. “Some staff may have a tendency to round up to 5 or 0 rather than recording the actual number.”

Million Hearts® brings together communities, health systems, non-profit organizations, federal agencies, and private sector partners from across the country to fight heart disease and stroke.



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Because it is not a licensed health care profession in Maryland, there is wide variation in the level of training and skills possessed by entry-level medical assistants. Before 1996, some employees working in medical assistant positions at JHCP had no formal training. At that time, it was decided that hiring standards would be implemented that requiring all medical assistants to become credentialed as Certified Medical Assistants by passing the American Association of Medical Assistants examination.

In 2002, another major competency goal was established. A task force comprised of nurses, physicians, managers, educators and human resource specialists reviewed the functions of the JHCP's medical assistants and agreed on essential skills, knowledge and performance standards that would be required for ongoing employment in all primary care practices. Advancement criteria were also developed. The result was the creation of the Medical Assistant Training and Career Ladder (MATCAL).

The Medical Assistant I class (MA-I) was developed to provide: 1.) Assessment of core clinical skills and knowledge in a structured setting; 2.) Review of each individual's performance including a written plan for remediation of any deficiencies; and 3.) Communication with the employee's supervisor. The content and structure of the MA-I class and skills assessment methodology is updated periodically based on feedback from practices.

After completing MA-I, each employee was assigned to a trained mentor in his or her workplace. Practice was limited until any needed remediation was completed. The supervisor was responsible for retesting and reporting back on all skills to the MA-I manager. Employees who failed to demonstrate competence within the 90-day probationary period were terminated. At first, MA-I was scheduled within a 90-day probationary orientation, but because some employees were found to have serious skills gaps, preliminary assessment now occurs on the second day of employment, and MA-I occurs on day five.

Blood pressure measurement skills were assessed individually using two instructors; one was a 'simulated' patient while the other observed and scored performance. The observer listened through a teaching stethoscope as the employee measured the 'patient's' blood pressure. Passing required demonstration of the proper technique, including correct patient positioning, selection of the right size cuff, and successful measurement of both systolic and diastolic readings within 2 mm Hg of what the observer heard.

In the decade since the implementation of the MATCAL, the blood pressure skills pass rate has improved from 84 percent to 92 percent. In 2012, the assessment program was expanded to include recently recruited nurses, both RNs and LPNs.

According to Dr. McGuire, 'skills drift' can happen to anyone working in the medical field. "Even seasoned professionals need to refresh their essential skills periodically," she explains. "Getting back to basics and reviewing important techniques and concepts ensures competency at every level."

Medical assistants are an increasingly important part of the primary care team. Because there can be wide variations in their skills proficiency--even when they are certified or registered graduates of credentialed training programs--JHCP prefers to verify clinically important skills immediately upon hiring.

"This practice eliminates many potential errors, and gives new staff a clear picture of their role and expectations," explains McGuire. "The concept of team-based care requires everyone who interacts with patients to be at the top of their skill set to maximize both efficiency and patient outcomes."